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THE NEED FOR AND VALUE OF PHYSICAL EXAMINATION OF EMPLOYEES AS ILLUSTRATED IN THE WORK OF THE RIKE-KUMLER COMPANY

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The inspiration for, and the realization of the value of, a physical examination of employes came to our company from the opportunity of observing this same work as it has been done in The National Cash Register Company of this city for a number of years, and also from the testimony of the management of that company as to the benefits derived.

The Rike-Kumler Company operates a department store in the city of Dayton. The determination to apply a physical examination as a test of employment took definite form in the spring of 1912, when we moved into a new store with largely increased space and the opening of many new departments. These new departments included a large restaurant and tea-room, a lunch counter, a soda fountain, a bakery, ice cream making, candy manufacturing and a market department. Our ambition to make these departments thoroughly sanitary, clean and attractive led us to the very natural fear that we might have external conditions all they should be, and yet, without some check and information as to the people actually doing the work, we might unknowingly be harboring filth and disease more dangerous than open dirt and disorder. It was this need that decided us on physical examination and definite physical requirements as a test for employment.

Again, our employes number from 600 to 850 people, and our experience with certain cases of tubercular trouble and other diseases emphasized the necessity for some means of protection of the members of our store family from each other, and also the great desirability and importance of safeguarding our customers.

Again, our experience had shown to us that had we possessed accurate information as to the true physical condition of our employes, we should, in a number of instances, have been instrumental in suggesting changes in location and in mode of living

that might have saved years of life for work and earning capacity. We felt keenly our responsibility in this regard, and this in no small way fixed our determination to undertake this work.

Another consideration leading to our decision was our belief in this work as a means of developing individual and collective efficiency in our whole organization. We have been doing educational work among our people for a number of years, and the value of mental equipment was always recognized, and definite means were taken to supply it. In the same way, good health was recognized as a very important factor in the success of our business, and yet nothing was done to emphasize its importance. The store superintendent charged with the duties of employment, without a physical examination, must rely on his superficial observation and the integrity of the applicants' statements relative to health. Supported, however, by a physical examination, his investigation may be confined to the applicant's other qualifications for the position he or she desires to occupy. Thus was the need for such work demonstrated to us.

The value of physical examination of employes has been proven by our actual experience. Here is the testimony of our present store superintendent:

Our house physician, nurse and hospital perform such valuable service to our business in the way of keeping our people on the firing line, in the way of economy to our employes and ourselves, that to dispense with it would be an unwise move. Stores not having such facilities do not realize that the investment would pay large annual health dividends.

An outline of the way this work is handled may be of interest. We have a small but well equipped hospital and are prepared to take care of first aid treatment in case of accident, and there are beds for temporary rest in acute cases. The work is done by a house physician who devotes a definite part of each day to the task. A nurse is employed who devotes her full time, and is in charge of the hospital and the demands upon it in the doctor's absence. The service rendered is free of any expense to the employes and is only compulsory to the extent of the initial or entrance examination.

At the time we began the work of physical examination, we made a compulsory examination of all the people in our employ, and somewhat to our surprise we met only a minimum of objection

and criticism. Each applicant for a position is examined when employed, and is required to measure up to certain definite standards. First of all, there must be freedom from contagious diseases or epilepsy; they must be fairly sound as to the special senses, particularly sight and hearing; throats and teeth are carefully examined; the heart and lungs must be in a reasonably sound condition, and if hernia, varicosities or flat feet are present, they must be under proper control.

Every employe is free to call on the doctor or may be sent by the department head to him during his hours. In order to give some idea of the use that is made of this service by the employes on their own account, our records show that on an average we give more than 350 treatments to our employes monthly, and that customers are taken care of to the average of about fifteen per month.

On account of having this service available, we have educated our employes to use it promptly, with the result that we have almost wholly eliminated septic infections or blood poisoning resulting from minor accidents. Approximately 75 per cent of our employes are women. Women who must be on their feet suffer more at the menstrual period than those who may be at rest. One of the great functions of our service is the relief of this suffering, and we have found that not only is relief possible, but that many days of employment are saved both for the employes and ourselves through the ability to render this service scientifically and promptly.

The house physician has charge of all matters relating to store sanitation and is ready at all times, and does give to employes advice on any topic relating to diet, hygiene or general health.

It has developed in our work here that about 5 per cent of all applicants for positions, and who would, without a physical examination, be employed, are shown to be unfit for service by such an examination. The reasons for their rejection classify themselves in the order of their importance as follows:

First, Venereal diseases.

Second, Tubercular troubles.

Third, Skin troubles of a contagious nature.

Fourth, Eye diseases of a contagious nature.

Fifth, Physical unfitness not of a contagious nature.

In addition, we find that there are about 5 per cent whom we put in a doubtful class, but whom we employ. Those employed, however, under these conditions, are examined weekly and this examination is compulsory until we are sure that they are able to do their work safely and improve in their physical condition while doing so. Those coming in this class are frequently under weight or are in poor physical condition, owing to their having done work for which they were unfitted.

These examinations also give the house physician and the employment officer the ability to work together and to shift a person from one position to another for which that person is better fitted physically.

Fully 25 per cent of the applicants have minor defects which are corrected when their attention is called to them, but which would be neglected if they were not examined. Oftentimes these defects are unknown and a distinct gain has been made to the person examined and also to the company for which he or she must work. These minor defects classify themselves as follows:

First, Defective teeth.

Second, Nose and throat troubles.

Third, Defective vision.

Fourth, Flat feet.

Fifth, Varicose veins of different types.

Sixth, Slight hernia.

All of these are usually corrected promptly, and our observation shows that attention to these minor details results very soon in an increase in general health and a greater capacity for work.

The remaining percentage is found to be in good condition when first examined. Inasmuch as ours is the only mercantile firm in the city to exact physical examination as a qualification for employment, we find a number who, knowing themselves unfit, will not submit to an examination and leave rather than submit to it.

In the past four years, by the precautions we have taken and the physical examination insisted upon, we have been able to protect our employes so that we have not had one acute eruptive contagious disease develop during their service. True, some have developed outside of the store, but we have been fortunate enough to get them away from their employment and under the care of

their physician forty-eight hours before the contagious condition appeared. We have had venereal disease and tuberculosis develop within the organization, but examination has revealed these conditions and enabled us to eliminate those affected from the service.

One of the startling and impressive facts that has been developed is that our records show that the majority of applicants infected with venereal disease have been those applying for positions in our kitchen, soda dispensing, and market departments.

As a concrete example of the conditions that are met from time to time, your attention is called to the following cases:

Last fall the cashier in one of the departments on the second floor came to work complaining of a sore throat. As soon as the store opened, she went to the hospital. The nurse found conditions serious and sent her home immediately. Two days later the information was brought to the store that she had scarlet fever, but due to the prompt action taken here, no one was exposed. The cashier, too, having medical attention early, had every advantage in fighting the disease and the chance of a light attack and a quick recovery.

A similar case was that of a saleswoman in the basement department who developed diphtheria several days after the physician had insisted that she go home and stay there.

One of the bus boys serving in the dining room was found to be in the incipient stages of tuberculosis. He was transferred to other work and was regularly observed by the doctor with the result that he is steadily improving.

Just at the holiday time Dayton was confronted with an epidemic of the grippe, and it would be difficult to estimate the good our institution derived through what might be termed first aid work in warding off the attacks of this disease. We would undoubtedly have been unable to supply substitutes to fill the places of those who would have been afflicted. This point brings up the fact that the benefit of our physical examination and the work done by the physician and nurse is evidenced by the raising of the percentage of regular attendance to a very high mark.

We, in common with other merchants and manufacturers, are very much concerned about our "labor turnover" and are endeavoring to get the "labor turnover" as low as is possible.

We believe that our work in the matter of physical examination and service is going to help us reduce this percentage.

As was pointed out earlier in the paper, we are making constant endeavor to train our employes, employing an educational director who not only gives lessons as to materials and to the method of store service, but who teaches our people many elementary branches. Our physical examination prevents our training those who are unfit and enables us to give our best efforts toward those who are not otherwise handicapped.

Our experience thus has demonstrated that compulsory physical examination of employes has tangible and intangible value. Our store life is lived with a feeling of security that would otherwise be impossible. We are conscious that, in addition to providing all the material comforts for our patrons, we have taken steps to protect them from unknown and unobserved dangers. We believe there is an actual dollar and cents value in the increase of the percentage of regular attendance among our employes and in the fact that we are not wasting effort in the training of the physically unfit.

We feel there is a splendid moral effect in the impression that every employe must receive from our insistence on a physical examination, in that they put a new value on health and all the means that may be used to acquire and keep it. Undoubtedly it has increased our general store efficiency and has better enabled us to render the kind of service we owe to the whole community.